

## Contemporary Koori Artist

*Peter Clarke*

For many years I have always been an admirer of Aboriginal Art from all regions within Australia. The great length that the artist has gone through to tell their stories is remarkable and powerful at the same time. There are many different styles of art, some movable art and some not. I would refer to cave paintings and trees as non-moveable art whereas bark paintings are.

My interest in art comes from a personal journey through childhood to man. When I was two months old, I was removed from my parents and placed into a catholic boy's orphanage in Ballarat. I recall the many times while sitting in the church being bored out of my mind and would often find myself staring at the huge leadlight windows above. As the morning sunlight would shine through these windows, the reflections on the carpet floors would move towards me. Purple, pink, blue and red and yellow were all radiant colours that caught my eye during the morning mass. I know that each window told a story from out of the bible but I was far from understanding the bible as a child.

Soon I found myself trying to draw these paintings in the church but often failed miserably and dually noted by many of my peers. I continued to draw regardless of the outside criticism and soon found solace when one of the nuns commented on my pictures.

As the years went by, I was transferred to another boy's orphanage in Ballarat because my old home was being closed down. This had a huge impact on me emotionally. All my early childhood memories were being taken from me and now I was to be placed into a public orphanage. I soon found out that manners were not a necessity and you often had to take before you were ever given in this new orphanage. At night I would fall asleep on the thought of my old friends and nuns back at Nazareth and those big leadlight windows within the church walls. This new orphanage was not a home for me but a prison of sadness and despair.

When I finally had my wardship revoked at the age 17 or 18, I made tracks to catch up with my Aboriginal family down in Portland Victoria. The years had gone by and my time trying to be accepted into my family was made difficult because of my absence. I would often ask my mother about the stories of the Gunditjamara people but her stories were fragmented due to her excessive drinking and hardship living. It was not her fault! My mother also suffered the loss of her children, all six of them.

My approach to my uncles within the community was often deflected as them being too busy to spend time in talking to me about my culture and the stories of the past. I however understood that my time had passed as a child to be told of these stories and so I did not ask again. Instead, I chose my own path to land, country and water. It was like a spiritual healing given to me naturally without a word spoken but just the sound of nature and all its surroundings. It was the many places I visited that gave me the colours to create my paintings once again

In the many Aboriginal paintings I have seen, the artist chooses to paint with traditional colours being ochre their choice. I respect that and lay no criticism towards their paintings at all. But from where I've grown up, I have seen many vibrant colours and have chosen to portray them in my Aboriginal paintings. Although I have not been privy to the many sacred stories given to my natural parents, I choose to paint Aboriginal paintings with a contemporary story and view in my life.

I don't think that I could pretend to run around in a lap lap and say that I live the traditional way of life, at least not here in Ballarat. But my journey through tribal countries and land give me thought to the once was and leaves me with cultural ideas in my head to paint for all to see.

Although my childhood memories can often be seen as dark and bleak, I choose to paint with vibrant colours that speak many languages here and abroad. My paintings out shine my darkness within and shines for all those to see and admire.